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ABSTRACT

Mail questionnaires sent to 200 commuters (100 white and 100 black) indicated a number of differences and similarities between the two groups, using chi square and t at the .05 level. The black commuter, as compared to the white, tended to be an older married female traveling further and spending more time and money to get to campus, and receiving lower grades. She was also more interested in a day-care center, a place to change and shower and stay overnight, black student activities, and counseling services than the typical white commuter. Among the more interesting findings on commuters in general, regardless of race, were that only 5 percent were in carpools, most would prefer to be commuters if given the choice, and most were interested in basic safety and survival needs, such as personal lockers or a place to take naps, rather than other student services. Statistical tables accompany the text. (Author)

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A COMPARISON OF BLACK AND WHITE UNIVERSITY STUDENT COMMUTERS

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Research Report # 2-75

* Currently with the Maryland Council for Higher Education.

The literature dealing with the social psychology of commuter students is relatively sparse. The proportion of commuter students attending colleges and universities is hard to determine but there appears to be an increase in numbers presently commuting from their parents' home or living in apartments (Hardwick and Kazlo, 1974; Trivett, 1974). George (1970), Harrington (1972), Schuchman (1974) and Chickering (1971, 1974) provide a number of hypotheses and assumptions about the personalities, peer relationships and academic and non-academic lifestyles of commuter students. Their conclusions picture commuter students as less secure emotionally, less able academically, less sociable with their peers, and less involved with extracurricular activities.

But a closer look at the literature shows that actually little systematic research or need analysis of specific subgroups of the heterogeneous commuter population has been conducted.

In recent years, the predominantly white universities and colleges throughout the United States have been enrolling more black students (Sedlacek, Merritt and Brooks, 1975; Sedlacek and Clarke, 1975). While research has been done on the admissions of black freshmen, virtually nothing is known about the activities and environmental needs of black commuter students. There is considerable evidence that black and white students in general face different issues and problems in adjusting to a predominantly white campus (Sedlacek, 1974; Sedlacek and Brooks, 1975; Brooks, Sedlacek and Mindus, 1973; Merritt, Sedlacek and Brooks, 1974).

But how do these differences apply to commuter students? Are black and white commuters different on any significant dimensions? If there are differences between black and white commuter students,

what do these differences mean for program development and services? If there are no differences, what general needs can be identified as requiring attention? The purpose of this study was to provide answers to these and related questions.

Method

A random sample of 200 undergraduate commuter students (100 white and 100 black) who were enrolled at the University of Maryland, College Park were administered a mail questionnaire. Fourteen of the white students and nine of the black students were not students, not commuters, had the wrong address or could not be reached via registered mail and were dropped from the study. Usable returns were received from 63 of 86 (73%) white students and 57 of 91 (63%) black students. Data were analyzed by chi square and *t*. Use of the term significance throughout this report will indicate statistical significance at the .05 level.

Results

There were no significant differences between black and white commuters on class standing. About 25% were in each class, freshman through senior. Also, about 60% of both black and white commuters attended an orientation program and were taking about 14 semester hours. However, white commuters reported significantly higher grade point averages than black commuters (2.90 versus 2.48). Table 1 shows the distribution of sex and marital status of black and white commuters. There were relatively more black female commuters than white female commuters and more of the black male commuters were

married compared to white male commuters. Black commuters were also significantly older (22.89 versus 20.89 years) and had significantly more children than white commuters (.38 versus .11 children). There were no differences on where black and white commuters would be living; about 54% lived with their parents or guardians, 17% lived with their spouse, 10% lived in an apartment or room alone and another 10% shared a room or apartment. Four percent of the black, and none of the white commuters lived in the house of a relative other than parent or guardian.

Blacks commuted a significantly greater roundtrip distance (21.41 miles versus 13.89 miles), had significantly greater out-of-pocket weekly costs ($8.20 versus $4.10), and spent significantly more time commuting (27.90 minutes versus 18.37 minutes one-way) than did whites. However, there were no significant differences in the mean number of hours spent a day on campus (blacks - 5.49 hours, whites - 5.20 hours) or the mean number of days (or nights) a week they commute (blacks 4.59, whites 4.60). Additionally, there were no significant differences between black and white commuters on mode of transportation usually used: most used their own cars (blacks 79%, whites 86%), 5% of each group was in a carpool and 5% walked. However 9% of the blacks regularly used the bus compared to 2% of the whites. There were also significant differences in the starting points of blacks and whites. More blacks than whites tended to come from the suburban areas such as Prince George's (55% versus 70%) and Montgomery (14% versus 25%) Counties. Only 2% of each sample commuted from Baltimore City and none commuted from Baltimore County. Also 5% of the blacks and no whites commuted from Howard County.

There were no significant differences between black and white commuters on whether they had a job (58% of the blacks worked and 57% of the whites worked) or the weekly hours they worked (blacks 13.97, whites 11.09). Also 51% of the blacks and 52% of the whites indicated that they would prefer to commute if given a choice. There were no significant differences between black and white commuters on feeling whether commuters should get priority registration (38% blacks, 43% whites), feeling part of the student body (21% blacks, 27% whites), and feeling safe on the campus at night (44% blacks, 50% whites). Black and white students spent most of their time between classes as follows: Undergraduate Library (23% blacks, 22% whites), Student Union (23% blacks, 22% whites), McKeldin Library (11% blacks, 6% whites), departmental lounges (11% blacks, 11% whites), empty classrooms (9% blacks, 2% whites), home (5% blacks, 8% whites), residence halls (4% blacks and no whites), and "other" (14% blacks, 29% whites). These differences were not significant.

There were also no significant differences in where black and white commuters did most of their studying: home (59% blacks, 48% whites), Undergraduate Library (21% blacks, 25% whites), McKeldin Library (7% blacks, 8% whites), Student Union (5% blacks, 6% whites), departmental lounges (4% blacks, no whites) and "other" (5% blacks, 13% whites). Blacks and whites did not differ on where they regularly eat with about 36% of each group reporting the Student Union, 13% reporting vending machines, 9% off-campus restaurants, 6% dining halls, and 36% "other."

In terms of use of services if made available, as compared to whites, blacks were significantly more interested in meeting basic safety and survival needs: a day-care center (73% versus 57%), a place on-campus to shower and change clothes (84% versus 60%) and a place to stay overnight on campus (80% versus 68%). There were no significant differences between blacks and whites on interest in: a personal locker (86% of both), a personal campus mailbox (53% of both), Saturday classes (47% of both), evening classes (62% of both) or a quiet place to take naps (85% of both).

Table 2 shows means, standard deviations and *t* tests comparing black and white commuter use of facilities and program attendance. Results show that whites were significantly more interested in movies (item 28), and sports facilities (item 29), while blacks were significantly more interested in black related activities (items 30 and 35), and the Counseling Center (item 33).

Discussion

While there were many similarities between black and white commuters, a pattern of differences between these two groups emerged. The black commuter, as compared to the white, tended to be an older married, female traveling further and spending more time and money to get to campus, and receiving lower grades. She was also more interested in a day-care center, a place to change and shower and stay overnight, black student activities and counseling services than the typical white commuter.

It appears then that cultural and racial differences must also be applied to developing programs for commuter students. As noted

earlier, a number of studies have shown that the lifestyles and cultural backgrounds that students bring to the college or university are critically important in providing a comfortable academic and non-academic atmosphere. Black commuters appear to have some unique needs which should be met by a school. Of course, the sample studied here was small and further studies should be conducted before the results could be considered entirely generalizable.

Aside from the comparison of black and white commuters, this study provides a number of interesting findings about commuters in general. It is disappointing but not surprising that only 5% of all commuters were in carpools. The society as a whole, as well as student personnel programs and physical plant services, seem to have failed to make any change in environmental concerns such as the one-driver-one-car habits of Americans. In these times of mounting concern about energy usage, this may be something worth considerably more attention by universities and colleges.

For example, The National Clearinghouse on Commuter Programs has published a "How To Do It" resource booklet (Hardwick and Kazlo, 1974) outlining positive alternatives for increasing carpooling; many plans include measures that provide computerized carpool matching and preferential carpool parking programs. The matching programs provide incentives such as free parking or close-in parking to encourage carpools.

Another interesting finding in the study was that a majority of commuters, black and white, preferred commuting if given the choice. This lends considerable support to the idea that commuters

are unique students and that they were not forced off-campus. However, most commuters do not feel a part of the campus. Before this is interpreted as negative, let us make sure this is not a projected feeling of personnel workers. If commuters are satisfied with their lifestyles, what evidence is there that they are missing anything important? Commuters were interested in particular services and facilities such as personal lockers or a place to take naps, which indicates that there are effective environmental changes that could be made in behalf of commuters in general.

Program Response - Blueprint for Action

The information provided by this study of commuter student needs will only become important if we can translate the data gathered on needs into creative educational programs and services. Perhaps these data can provide logical starting points for developing parsimonious programs for a potentially neglected group of students: the commuter.

Here is a start for translating this research information from data into action:

1. Perhaps we need to have a theoretical model against which to develop and evaluate our services and programs for commuters. It is felt that Maslow's hierarchy of human needs (see Figure 1) can provide a theoretical basis for developing an effective and efficient services model. Student personnel workers should be designing programs and services which are aimed at satisfying commuter students' basic needs for survival and safety before moving on to

meeting students' love and self-esteem needs. For example, many of the commuter students (both black and white) are concerned with safety and security problems related to parking rather than cultural or social activities.

2. Student government organizations and student personnel officers should examine the priority of allocating more funds for campus physical development projects such as carpool and buspool projects, decentralized rest and relaxation areas, lockers and overnight facilities.

3. More in-depth studies need to be conducted on use of free time and satisfaction with services and facilities used by commuters. We need to know more about the quality of life and patterns of living, studying, working and relaxing by commuter students. The results of this study may provide an impetus for a greater commitment to do more in-depth analysis of who commuter students are, and what they want from higher education.

4. Immediate consideration should be given to the feasibility of developing and instituting an at-cost suburban commuter bus system. An express and direct bus service to high density commuter population centers could cut down on the time and cost of commuting and provide a method for developing community reference groups which might help alleviate the sense of isolation and alienation felt by many commuter students.

5. The low utilization of services and participation in programs by commuter students might mean that their needs are being met in the community at large, that different programs are needed to attract their interest or tnat new approaches may be needed to inform commuters of services and opportunities. For example, development of more community-based programs such as mixers and block parties or church activities in their own geographic areas might help. Also, the use of the mass media such as radio spots, dialogues and commuter action line columns might begin to build a sense of caring about commuter concerns and needs.

6. The possibility of developing an informal babysitting cooperative along the lines of carpool programs might help alleviate babysitting problems for commuters.

The Future:

Where do we go from here? Historically, commuters have been viewed as a homogeneous group of apathetic students. This study has attempted to provide a framework for examining and identifying in what ways the subpopulations of the commuter community are different in physiological, psychological and service needs. It appears that at least in relationship to black and white commuter students there are specific differences which demand specific program responses. It is recommended that universities understand and identify the needs of these various commuter subpopulations in trying to develop programs which are responsive to students who happen to be commuter students. This recommendation is supported by Wilson (1975) who suggests the need for in-depth study of subcultures of the black

commuting students so that more effective student services can be provided. Any institution examining alternatives for more appropriately meeting commuter student needs should begin by assessing the impact of the physical environment on commuters and their use of and satisfaction with services and programs offered to them. An excellent research model for this exploration has been developed and reported by Williamson, (1971, 1972a,b) in the University of Alberta Commuter Student Studies.

More research emphasizing the needs of different commuter subpopulations and the powerful impacts of the physical environment on activity levels, attitudes and student growth and development would add significantly to our understanding of the "college student" population. Furthermore, it would go a long way in providing some concrete directions for solving the double message many institutions direct at commuters, "You can get an education as long as you can tolerate or knock down the physical barriers put in your path." Also, it appears that most commuters are satisfied with their life of commuting and, except for the physical barriers, they like the university as they found it. The detachment of commuters from campus life seems to be as much or more the result of the students' preference for involvement with their community, work, old high school friends, or their basic nature, as it is the result of lack of attention to the commuter student on the part of the university.

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TABLE 1

Distribution of Sex and Marital Status

for Black and White Commuters*

	Black		White	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Single	13	28	33	20
Married	5	7	2	8
Other	2	1	0	0

* Chi square significant beyond .05

TABLE 2

Facilities Used and Programs Attended

by Black and White Commuters

ITEM NO.		Blacks Mean*	Blacks S.D.	Whites Mean*	Whites S.D.
26	Music (Rock, Soul, Classical, etc.), Concerts	2.59	1.07	2.61	.87
27	Plays, Art Exhibits, Lectures, Special Programs, etc.	2.89	.96	2.81	.86
28	Student Union and Company Cinematheque Movies	2.42**	.85	3.05**	1.02
29	Sports Facilities (swimming pools; tennis, basketball and volley ball courts, playing fields, etc.)	2.75**	1.17	3.27**	1.29
30	Black Student Union Activities	2.57*	.95	1.97**	.26
31	Student Union Entertainment Facilities (games room, bowling and billiard alleys, the Pub, etc.	2.87	1.06	3.12	1.03
32	University Chapel Services	2.13	.73	2.03	.52
33	Counseling Center	2.51**	.90	2.17**	.50
34	Health Center (Infirmary)	2.43	.86	2.43	.80
35	Black Cultural Center (Nyumburu)	1.98**	.62	1.61**	.49

* 1 = never heard of it; 5 = regular use or attendance.

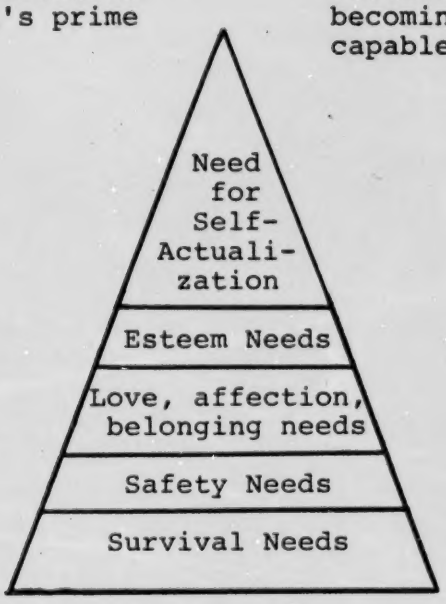
** Significant beyond .05 level using *t*.

Figure 1

Maslow's Hierarchy of Human Needs*

Maslow emphasizes that the need for self-actualization is a healthy person's prime motivation.

Self-actualization means actualizing one's potential, becoming everything one is capable of becoming.



On the whole, an individual cannot devote energy toward the satisfaction of needs at one level until the needs at the levels below are satisfied to a reasonable extent.

* Maslow, A. H., *Motivation and personality*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1954.